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A Taste for Theater

By Lou Fancher



Albert and Merriem Palitz Photo Lou Fancher

Tasting Night at the California Shakespeare Festival in Orinda is a lot like nonpareils, the colorful sprinkles found atop cupcakes and holiday cookies. The outdoor theater's plays, already a sweet treat, are made a touch more savory by visiting vendors, offering complimentary food and beverages to ticket holders.

During the run of each production, six Tuesday and Wednesday performances are preceded by free tastings in the Bruns lobby. Purveyors have included wine, beer, and sweets merchants-and the beloved Peet's Coffee & Tea, whose participation gets a nightly 'Peet's!' cheer from audiences.

"I'm hoping they'll go, 'Doctor Kracker!' someday," says Kristin Brun, western regional representative for Doctor Kracker Flatbreads. Brun has a long association with Cal Shakes and remembers the earliest years vividly. "Then, we all used to huddle under our blankets in Berkeley," she says.

The Dolezal-Ng family had not been at Cal Shakes since the children were born. Bill and Carol, father and mother of twins Grace and Jeremy, now 11, came for the production, not for the treats. Grace, who is involved in Cal Shakes' summer theater program, and Jeremy, who prefers sports, but has also set foot on stage, munch on picnic food, sharing memories of Don Quixote and The Music Man. "I've always liked theater and acting," Grace says. Asked for a mini review of his sister's work, Jeremy says, "She's pretty good." Their father contributes his reason for returning, saying, "We hadn't been together for a long time, so I cancelled my meeting to be with the family."

Merriem Palitz, a Lafayette resident, has been coming to Cal Shakes for 22 years. That's a lot of Peet's coffee, but she is devoted to more than tasting night's perks. Accompanied by her son Albert, they pose willingly for a photo. Even the recent renovations are not the meat and potatoes of their evening: "We haven't done the tour yet, but the theater group just gets better and better," Albert says. Pressed to be specific, he answers quickly: "They are so supported by the community, and they can be daring and original because of that."

Bette Siegel found an original means for attending tasting night herself. "I won two tickets from BART," she said, proudly. Her friend, Susan Renke, was lucky too, and plans to return for Macbeth. "It's like campfire night when you were a kid," she says. The smile on her face is genuine, the tone of her voice youthful.

Pam Jacob is in her 10th year serving Peet's coffee at Cal Shakes. She wouldn't pass up a tasting night assignment. "It's a chance to let people try something new for free - a chance to share," she says. "I stay for the product and the sense of community."

The warm, family-friendly feeling persists throughout the night, despite the fact that Mrs. Warren's Profession, George Bernard Shaw's raw, stormy play about a mother and daughter, is far from cozy. It's difficult to imagine Mrs. Warren, played with astounding outrage and heart-wrenching honesty by Stacy Ross, snuggling up with her business-minded daughter Vivie, made irritating and admirable by Anna Bullard. The result might be lethal, for even a "polite" conversation brings out the barbs between the two.

Relations are no less messy for the men. Richard Thieriot, as Frank Gardner, is boisterous and belligerent towards his father, Reverend Samuel Gardner. Rod Gnapp captures the sanctimonious fatherly role, which veers towards the cliché, with quivery sinfulness.

Director Timothy Near keeps the cast finely balanced with Dan Hiatt's lovable Mr. Praed, and Andy Murray's hate-him-the-moment-you-meet-him Sir George Crofts. Erik Flatmo's set and Meg Neville's costumes, both incendiary blends of violent magentas, emerald greens, and severely geometric black and white, echo the depth and ferocity of the characters.

One scene burns deepest: cutting to the heart and soul of the production. It's a twisty mother-daughter dance, all lacing arms and swirling skirts, that weaves an irregular path to end in embrace. Holding on-or squeezing the life from each other?-a parent and child test the definition of family connection.



Bill, Jeremy, Carol and Grace Dolezal-Ng Photo Lou Fancher

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